

## How Colombia Became Abu Dhabi's Human Reservoir for Proxy Wars



On August 4, the Sudanese army announced it possessed “documents and evidence proving the involvement of mercenaries from the Republic of Colombia” fighting alongside the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) militias in El Fasher, western Sudan. The Sudanese government confirmed that it had submitted this evidence to the United Nations Security Council, warning that the conflict was evolving into a “transnational terrorist war, waged by proxy.”

Just two days later, Sudan's state television reported that the army had successfully destroyed a UAE military aircraft as it landed at an airstrip controlled by the RSF in western Sudan, killing at least 40 individuals most of them Colombian mercenaries.

On August 2, the “Joint Force” of Sudanese armed movements, which is fighting alongside the national army, declared that it had discovered, during a battle in El Fasher, the participation of dozens of foreign mercenaries siding with Hemedti's RSF.

These included fighters from South Sudan, Chad, Ethiopia, and Kenya, in addition to over 80 Colombian mercenaries. A significant number of them were reportedly neutralized during the fighting. Many had been tasked with operating drones and coordinating artillery strikes.

The revelations sparked intense controversy in Colombia, prompting President

Gustavo Petro to urgently propose legislation banning mercenary recruitment. In a post on X (formerly Twitter), he described the practice as a form of human trafficking that turns people into tools of violence.

Investigations into this incident uncovered unsettling details about the United Arab Emirates' deepening involvement in regional conflicts and its strategic reliance on mercenary forces an increasingly institutionalized component of its national security apparatus. The UAE's recruitment of non-state fighters has become a central element of its expanding political and military influence in the Middle East and Africa.

With the exposure of Colombian mercenaries' role in fueling Sudan's war, the UAE's covert recruitment network has come into the spotlight, revealing a clandestine strategy of exerting regional dominance through illicit and unaccountable means contravening international law and humanitarian norms.

Now, Abu Dhabi faces renewed scrutiny and a crisis of legitimacy, especially as Colombian civil society grows increasingly outraged over the state's complicity in the deaths of its nationals in foreign proxy wars.

Since April 2023, Sudan has witnessed a brutal power struggle between the army and the RSF. According to the United Nations and local authorities, the conflict has resulted in more than 20,000 deaths and displaced around 15 million people. Other estimates place the death toll as high as 130,000.

### The Recruitment Pipeline

The UAE's recruitment of Colombian mercenaries is anything but haphazard. It is an orchestrated operation facilitated by private military firms with established reputations and extensive networks. Often, recruits are approached through indirect advertisements or via former military intermediaries in Bogotá, offered lucrative salaries and preferential residency packages far beyond what they might earn in Colombia.

Colombian journalist Santiago Rodríguez, an expert in armed conflict, security policies, and peace processes, published an in-depth investigation on La Silla Vacía, a leading Colombian investigative platform. His report revealed that the recruitment pipeline is a joint operation between a UAE-based company called Global Security Services Group (GSSG) and a Colombian firm run by retired Colonel Álvaro Quejano.

A longtime resident of the UAE, Quejano has extensive experience contracting former soldiers through multiple fronts, including A4SI—a company officially registered under his wife's name in Bogotá but effectively serving as a cover for his activities.

The Emirati firm is owned by businessman Mohammed Hamdan Al Zaabi, a figure who keeps a low profile but has been linked to pro-army propaganda during Sudan's 2019 protests. He was recently photographed with Uganda's military chief and publicly thanked for his role in providing military training.

Al Zaabi markets his firm as a leader in advanced private security solutions, offering "forward-looking security services" through a team of military and intelligence experts. However, he also serves as the UAE's de facto envoy for securing contracts with foreign mercenaries, including Colombians.

In Rodríguez's investigation, a Colombian mercenary using the pseudonym "César" recounted spending four months in Sudan participating in extensive RSF operations backed by UAE-linked security companies.

While deployed, César documented images of Sudanese teenagers lying alongside older fighters, flashing peace signs. "We were training children to die on the frontlines," he said, noting that training camps housed between 1,000 to 3,000 recruits, many as young as 10 or 12.

César, who previously fought as a mercenary in Ukraine, claimed the UAE-funded training camps were located south of Nyala, the capital of South Darfur and a key RSF stronghold. He trained the recruits in guerrilla warfare, AK-47 use, heavy machine guns, sniper rifles, and RPGs. After a few weeks of training, the children were sent directly to the frontlines.

Mercenaries were also assigned to strategic tasks such as securing Nyala Airport, a lifeline for RSF logistics and arms, supplied via flights from the UAE-controlled Bosaso port in Somalia. The airport also served as a launch site for modern drones used in attacks on Sudanese cities.

The report estimated that over 300 former Colombian soldiers had arrived in Sudan since last year, coordinated by Al Zaabi and Quejano. Calling themselves "Desert Wolves," they serve as RSF advisers and trainers. The RSF has been accused of committing massacres, ethnic cleansing in Darfur, and forced child recruitment.

César accused Quejano of withholding or delaying salaries. Though promised \$2,600 per month, deductions were common. Complaints were met with threats of expulsion at their own expense.

He further revealed that the UAE was directly involved in preparing these fighters. Forty Colombian mercenaries were flown to a base near Abu Dhabi for drone warfare training, including on Turkish Bayraktar drones.

Their movements were tightly controlled, with phones confiscated and frequent checks to prevent leaks. The investigation linked the UAE's interests in Sudan to

gold mining concessions and broader ideological ambitions.

Dozens of Sudanese children were forced to take up arms by these Colombian mercenaries, lured or coerced by poverty and threats of death. Sent to bloody battlefronts, their plight forms part of a vast criminal network stretching from Khartoum to Abu Dhabi and Bogotá.

In a related revelation, the intelligence website Africa Intelligence reported that Somalia's Bosaso Airport operated by a company tied to the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development and chaired by Tahnoun bin Zayed has become a central hub in a covert airbridge funneling arms and fighters to Darfur via Libya, bypassing international oversight.

### Sudan Isn't the First

This isn't the UAE's first foray into using Colombian mercenaries. The same model was employed during its intervention in Yemen as part of the Saudi-led coalition in 2015. Faced with the challenges of rugged terrain and lacking specialized forces, Abu Dhabi turned to the quick solution—foreign fighters.

Reports at the time revealed that the UAE had deployed up to 1,500 Colombian mercenaries in waves, overseen by foreign commanders from the US and parts of Africa. They were tasked with frontline combat, particularly in intense battles in Aden and Taiz, as well as carrying out special operations raids against Houthi targets. Others were assigned to guard Emirati officers deployed across Yemen.

The oil-rich state's strategy was clear: reduce casualties among its national forces and avoid domestic backlash that could destabilize the regime.

The UAE's mercenary program dates back to 2009–2010, when it covertly contracted a private military firm founded by Erik Prince (of Blackwater fame) to establish a foreign fighting force.

In 2011, The New York Times exposed a UAE program to recruit hundreds of ex-military personnel from Colombia and other Latin American nations. Officially, these forces were meant to protect critical infrastructure and suppress internal unrest.

Between 2012 and 2014, waves of mercenaries began arriving for training at specialized camps in Abu Dhabi. Offered monthly salaries between \$3,000 and \$5,000—considered generous by Colombian standards—they were soon deployed to Yemen once the war erupted in 2015.

By November that year, media reports confirmed the deaths of about a dozen Colombian fighters in Marib, publicly revealing the UAE's reliance on mercenaries for the first time.

By 2016–2017, leaks began surfacing about the inclusion of fighters from Chile, El Salvador, and South Africa in addition to Colombians. For the first time in 2018, human rights organizations began documenting the UAE's structured use of foreign fighters in controversial military operations.

### Why Colombians?

The UAE's preference for Colombian mercenaries isn't arbitrary. Several factors make Colombia an ideal recruitment ground. First, its veterans have extensive combat experience. Colombia endured over five decades of internal conflict against the FARC and various drug cartels, giving its soldiers a unique guerrilla warfare skillset.

Second, cost efficiency. Colombian mercenaries are far cheaper than their European or American counterparts, typically earning between \$2,000–\$3,000 a month—attractive by local standards but still a bargain for private contractors compared to Western mercenary rates of \$10,000 or more.

Third, there is a high supply of trained military personnel eager for foreign work. Many Colombian soldiers retire young and face limited economic opportunities at home. The promise of foreign contracts offers an irresistible escape from poverty.

Colombian troops are also known for their military discipline, making them easy to integrate into specialized units.

Additionally, US influence plays a role in smoothing the recruitment pipeline. Former American officers like Erik Prince maintain close ties with Colombian military officials, helping private firms identify and recruit veterans for clients like the UAE. Colombia has effectively become the “perfect supplier” of hired guns, explaining Abu Dhabi's consistent reliance on its soldiers.

In the end, such a sprawling operation could not occur without top-level coordination in Abu Dhabi, particularly from intelligence chief Tahnoun bin Zayed, whose name appears repeatedly in investigations. The firms involved, including Al Zaabi's, cannot be separated from the UAE's broader foreign policy agenda.

These companies act as unofficial extensions of state power tools for executing controversial strategies while preserving plausible deniability.